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HUMAN SIDE

'Innovation Blitz' jump-starts expansion for Quick Start

By Tucker Kennedy

Illinois Manufacturing Extension Center

Allen Brue, president and CEO of Quick Start Products and Solutions, Inc., was facing a challenge common to senior executives of both large and small manufacturing companies - how to expand his business. Although the company had experienced double-digit growth after he bought it back in November 2003, Brue realized that he was in a mature, cost-competitive market. "We needed to find ways to get more market share," said Brue. "It's all about growth."

Located in Rochelle, IL, Quick Start has manufactured diesel engine cold weather starting systems for 46 years. The company holds the original patent for ether injections systems. Quick Start's customers are original equipment manufacturers in the large diesel, trucking and construction equipment sectors. According to Brue, the product can be found in all types of diesel engines around the world.

The Illinois Manufacturing Extension Center (IMEC), a non-profit consulting organization and an affiliate of the NIST Manufacturing Extension Partnership, suggested that Brue consider an Innovation Blitz as a way to come up with new ideas for expanding his business. Innovation Blitz is IMEC's facilitated brainstorming process designed to help manufacturers identify new markets through enhanced products and services. The process

can help companies overcome a mature product line, declining margins, static or declining sales, changing markets or offshore competition to become more competitive.

"Innovation Blitz is very appropriate for companies that have reached a plateau and need something to jumpstart a process," said Cathy Frint, Business Alignment Team Leader at IMEC. IMEC's Business Alignment Team works with clients - small and mid-sized manufacturing firms in Illinois - to help them develop business improvement strategies and activities in line with their company's vision and growth path.

"IMEC's relationship with Quick Start Products began in 2003 shortly after Allen bought the company," recalled Frint. IMEC first helped Quick Start qualify for the ISO 9001:2000 Certification, the international quality management standard. IMEC then helped the company improve process efficiency and reduce costs through Lean training.

Frint could see that the company was ready for business expansion. "We had worked closely with Quick Start to build a foundation," she said. "Innovation Blitz would be the next step in our partnership."

Building a process

The three-step process begins with formation of a cross-functional team, followed by the Blitz and development and



Cathy Frint, Allen Brue and Tammy Zander discuss some of the outcomes of the Innovation Blitz. (Photo courtesy of IMEC)



Rob Brue, Donna Hurst, and Rhonda Burton assemble systems in the Quick Start factory.

implementation of an action plan. The team consists of people from both outside and inside the company. Innovation goes beyond creativity to include market intelligence.

IMEC assembled and brought in a team of 24 experienced manufacturing and business advisors, which included a number of engineers and former plant managers from small and large manufacturers around the state of Illinois. Brue was accompanied by his customer service and production managers and his marketing consultant.

Brue said he appreciated the broad knowledge and different perspectives that the members of the team brought to the table. In the case of a small company such as his, there are fewer people to think about innovation and act on it. Quick Start has fewer than 20 employees.

According to Frint, the typical innovation process involves having the team see the company's environment, which can include a plant tour, and then talk about the company's core competencies and capabilities. A core competency is a strength that differentiates a company from its competitors and provides value to customers. "It was important to stay focused on Quick Start's competencies and not stray too far from them," she stated.

IMEC provided two facilitators for the session. "One of the key pieces

Innovation Blitz is the facilitative process," Frint explained. "It is a brainstorming process, but there must be some element of structure. There is a wide variety of ideas, but the process still stays focused on areas where the company can expand."

Brue began the session by giving an overview of his company to the team. He then sat back and responded to the ideas offered by the team. Brue said that it was important to give the team enough information about his company so that the ideas would be valuable. "The external team members would ask if we had tried or thought of this idea or that one," he explained. "The process took our thinking to a whole new level."

Added Frint, "For the process to work, it's very important for a company leader to be open to new ideas. Success involves change."

A powerful experience

Brue described his experience with Innovation Blitz as very powerful. The three-hour session brought forth 113 ideas. To him, the process would have been valuable even if it only had produced a few marketable ideas. "We put in the effort and got a lot out of it," he concluded. "It really sparked my interest in doing other things."

The next step in the process is the post-Blitz review of all the ideas and data presented during the session. IMEC

sits down with the company to sort through the ideas and determine which ones have potential. "We prioritize the good ideas," said Frint, "and then help the company with market planning."

The process of innovation can result in a new product, service, process, business model or way of thinking. In addition to having some concrete product ideas, Quick Start now has made innovative thinking a practice. "It's getting you outside the box, outside the normal operations mode," explained Brue. "You need to think innovatively if you want to grow."

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The Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) is a program of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), located in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Information can be found at its Web site: www.mep.nist.gov. Inquiries can be sent via e-mail to mfg@nist.gov.

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